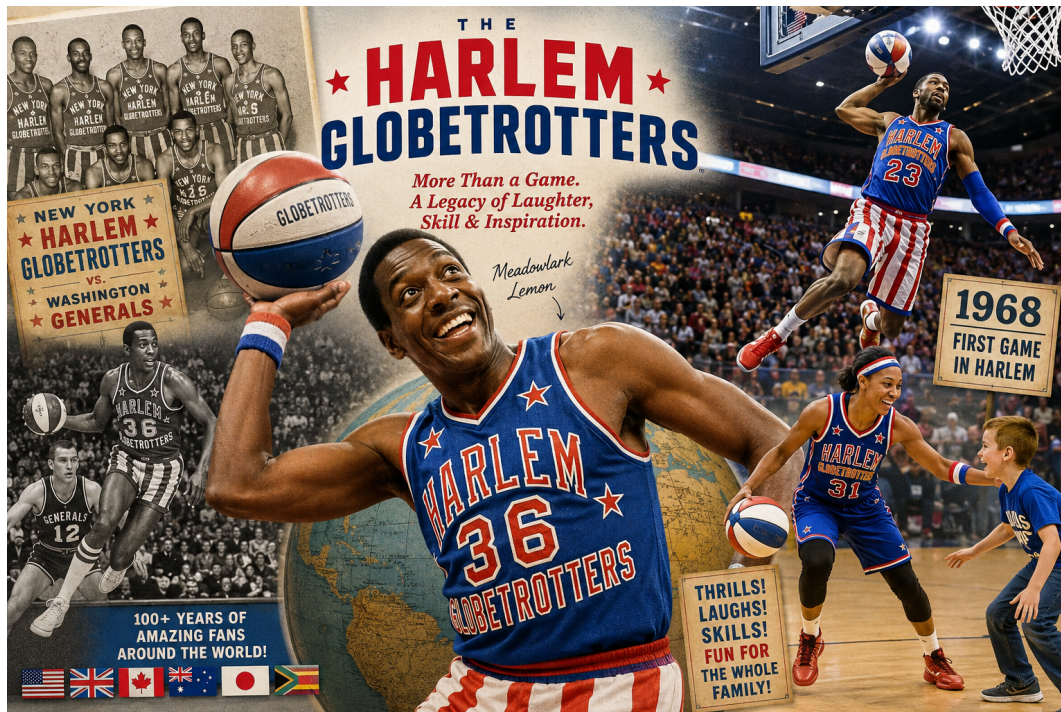




Remembering the Harlem Globetrotters

By Curtis Jerry Smothers

Chicago Roots--Not Harlem

The Harlem Globetrotters were not originally from Harlem, nor were they originally named the Globetrotters. Their first team name was the New York Harlem GlobeTrotters, and they were a team of professional Black basketball players who toured southern Illinois during the 1920's. The team actually began in Chicago, evolving from the Savoy Big Five before promoter Abe Saperstein renamed them the New York Harlem Globe Trotters. Their owner and manager, Abe Saperstein, figured that associating an all-Black basketball team with Harlem, then the nation's cultural center for African Americans, would lend an exotic aura to his venture.

Before they became famous entertainers, the Globetrotters were among the finest basketball teams in America. In 1948 and 1949 they stunned the basketball world by defeating George Mikan's powerful Minneapolis Lakers, victories that helped demonstrate that Black players belonged at the highest levels of professional basketball. Many historians consider those games milestones in the integration of the sport.

Didn't play in Harlem until 1968

Since those early days, of course, the team has morphed into its single-word version "Globetrotters," but it took them over 40 years to finally play a "home" game in Harlem (that was 1968). However, they have truly been trotting the globe and have played around the world to

packed stadiums of delighted, laughing fans in a truly zany and entertaining style of America's finest export: basketball.

Delighted me as a youngster

My first encounter with the Globetrotters was when I was a youngster growing up in St. Louis, Missouri. My dad took me and my brothers to a Globetrotters "game" against another "professional" team, the hapless Washington Generals. (The legend spread by the Globetrotters was that they were on a 2,000-game winning streak, and the stooges on the other team stood not a chance. The final score was something like 98 to 70 in favor of the Globetrotters, of course.)

Our outing to see Meadowlark Lemon and his cast of magicians was a truly fun experience. From beginning to end - the signature "Sweet Georgia Brown" theme and magical ball handling circle to playing practical jokes on the goofy referees - we laughed from the opening tip to the all-too-quick final buzzer. Even the half-time circus performers couldn't hold my attention. I just wanted the Globetrotters to come back.

An overseas putdown

Years later while I was stationed at the U.S. Navy headquarters in London, England, I took my English fiancé to a Globetrotters game at Wembley Stadium. The British fans adored the show, and got a special kick from an impromptu putdown of one young man who decided to heckle a Globetrotter named "Tex" Harrison.

"Hey, Tex!" shouted the young Brit in a very bad imitation of an American accent, "Where's yore gun, Tex?"

Tex, who apparently had enough of this young "yabbo," stopped playing, walked off the court about two rows into the stands, towering over him and still glistening with sweat, and yelled, "Why don't you just shut up!?" The heckler shut up and the crowd laughed and cheered.

Undeserved image

Amid the cheers and history, some have derided the Globetrotters as poor role models for African American men. In their heyday they were accused of "Uncle Toming for Abe (Saperstein)."

However, It wasn't until the 1950s that basketball's color barrier was broken, and up to that time the Globetrotters were the icons and main recruiters of Black basketball talent. Those people, Black or White, who felt then or still consider the Globetrotters as having sold out or as representing clownish Black stereotypes, should consider what Rev. Jesse Jackson once said in their defense.

According to Jesse Jackson, the Globetrotters were originally, and still are, players who represent the best in playing skills. They do what they do in a superior manner and deserve everyone's admiration.

The magic of Meadowlark Lemon

Returning to that first game in St. Louis when I was a lad, I saw Meadowlark Lemon stand at half court holding the ball behind his back with both hands:

"Hey, Ref," Meadowlark yelled, "Watch this!"

Meadowlark tossed the ball two-handed over his back and the ball disappeared cleanly through the basket without touching the rim. To my young eyes it bordered on magic.

Their magic continues

More than sixty years after my father first took me to see them, I found myself sitting beside my grandson laughing at many of the same routines—along with a few new ones. Few sports traditions survive that long. The Harlem Globetrotters have, because they offer something that never goes out of style: astonishing skill, clean comedy, and the simple joy of watching people have fun.